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At Fort Sheridan during World War I, the Lovell Hospital -- named after a distant cousin of Lake Forest resident James A. Lovell Jr. -- treated injured soldiers.

Nearly a century later, the first-ever hospital created jointly by the Navy and the Veterans Administration, expected to be completed in 2010 near the Naval Station Great Lakes in North Chicago, will be called the James A. Lovell Jr. Federal Health Care Center.

"I cannot imagine a greater honor than to have my name attached to this medical facility," said Lovell -- who has received the Medal of Freedom among his many honors -- during an event attended by hundreds at the North Chicago VA Medical Center Friday.

The health care center, which will cost about \$130 million and serve more than 100,000 veterans, sailors and others annually, looked to have little chance of existing as recently as eight years ago.

Back then, it was recommended that the Veterans Administration Medical Center in North Chicago be closed. U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th, of Highland Park, military veterans and others floated the idea of combining the VA with a new naval hospital.

"In our darkest days, when we thought we would have to preside over the orderly closing of this institution, our veterans all said, 'Hell no!'" Kirk said Friday.

The federal government approved the joint venture. At this point, a \$13 million emergency room and surgical facility has been built. Next year, ground will be broken on a \$100 million ambulatory care center.

The congressman praised Lovell, a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy who served as a naval aviator in the Korean War before becoming famous as an astronaut, especially as the commander of the ill-fated Apollo 13 mission.

"Jim Lovell is the living inspiration for Americans. In times like these, we need to recognize heroes," Kirk said.

Hollywood star Gary Sinise, who appeared in the movie "Apollo 13," listened to 1970 NASA recordings of astronauts within the troubled module to prepare for the film. He recalled how calm Lovell sounded even as his life and those of two others seemed destined to be doomed as an oxygen system failed before they steered the capsule back to earth.

"How many have heard the words, 'Houston, we have a problem?' " Sinise asked. "When you listen to the recording, it's like he's saying the toilet's plugged up. There's no panic."

Acting Secretary of Veteran Affairs Gordon Mansfield said Lovell honored all there by allowing his name to be used. He also pointed out the importance of top-notch military care.

"We are warm and comfortable here," Mansfield said in an auditorium at Bourke Hall. "Our troops over there (in Iraq) are warm and uncomfortable. Our troops deserve the best possible medical care America can provide. This facility will allow us to do this more effectively in the future."

Lovell, 79, agreed.

"Why do I feel this facility is needed? Because the periods of peace our country has enjoyed is few," he said.